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Harnessing Visibility: Creating Perspective in Narrative Film

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Harnessing Visibility:
Creating Perspective in Narrative Film

Lauren Chen, 2013-2014

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Introduction

This text is based on the research that I have conducted over the past year, building upon the observations that I have made and the readings that I have done during my time studying film and literature at Wellesley College and Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2010-2013. I became interested in film and performance when I was in preschool, when I first started work doing child acting. The work environment of the film and television industry was a large part of my life until I reached high school, when I decided to focus on my academic life. Outside of the high school classroom, I continued to immerse myself in film and performance; I became very involved in my school's music and theater programs, took a summer course on film through Duke University's Talent Identification Program, and joined the school newspaper staff, where I discovered my interest in writing about film. My academic interests were always with the English Department, and I also found that I had a passion for Russian Literature. In my sophomore year at Wellesley, I took Professor Vernon Shetley's course on Film Noir in conjunction with Professor Adam Weiner's course on the novels of Russian author Vladimir Nabokov. While taking these classes, I developed an understanding around my interest in Russian literature and the connection between Nabokov's writings and noir films: Nabokov's awareness of literary form clarified my understanding and appreciation for filmic form and its acknowledgement through self-reflexivity in noir cinema.

In this thesis project, I have written analyses of specific films belonging to genres ranging from Noir to Romantic Comedy. I chose films from many different Hollywood time periods, but each of them carries important self-reflexive elements that I feel work to create greater understanding and perspective around Hollywood culture, the art of storytelling, and our everyday lives. The thesis begins by introducing films that are overtly self-reflexive, and ends with an exploration of cinematic works that exhibit more subtle self-reflexive qualities. I recognize that, in some ways, the argument can be made that the majority of films out there carry some thread of self-reflexivity. However, my analysis of film has led me to the conclusion that self-reflexivity and self-awareness in the creation of artistic expression allow the receiver of the work to reach a greater understanding of themselves and the relationship between their own lives and the art to which they are exposed. This project has given me the opportunity to explore an artistic medium that I love, while also allowing me to celebrate one of the most important lessons that I have learned during my time at Wellesley College: the importance of perspective.

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I would also like to thank my friends and family for their continued love and support.

"FOR THOSE WONDERFUL PEOPLE OUT THERE IN THE DARK."

- Anonymous

CHAPTER 1

I: Understanding Self-reflexivity

Since its birth, film has been used as a storytelling medium, a visually and aurally fascinating method of sharing the tales and anecdotes of cinematic characters with viewers around the world. It is a medium in which realistic representation not only combines but also collides with fantasy, where these two contradictory elements of storytelling not only intertwine, but coalesce to create new perspectives. Film is a marriage of the the real and the fake, the building and breaking down of illusion that helps to create cinematic perspective. The creation of perspective is paramount to the relevance of the films treated in this thesis; creating perspective integrates different viewpoints and weaves them into single works. The content of the different viewpoints is less important than the fact that they exist at all, and their existence allows for broader understanding of the real world. Perspective allows us to understand more about the world in which we exist by viewing a fake one that we enjoy on the screen. For example, films such as Ben Affleck's "Argo" and Alfred Hitchcock's "North by Northwest" acknowledge and refer to the film world, and this acknowledgement creates a multidimensional platform over which

the viewer experiences the film: there is the real world (where the viewer resides), the film world (what the viewer is watching), the "real world" within the film (where the film's characters reside), and the film world within the film (the presence of the cinematic experience and the fantasy it provides as acknowledged by the characters in the film's diegesis). I would like to posit that honoring the existence of the dichotomy between reality and filmic fantasy is precisely what makes the cinematic experience so powerful in these films. Even in the most realistic of films, I believe that there are hints of perspective. However, I first want to explain how phenomenon operates in the most obviously perspectival of films.

The quality of being seen has always been a part of the film medium, but it has matured over time and is no longer the sole defining quality of cinema. Tom Gunning wrote an article entitled "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde" in which he discussed the idea that true cinema existed in the years leading up to 1906, the years during which the sharing of images with the world was the primary reason for making films. However, as the medium has matured, so has our understanding of it, and film has become more than just a means through which filmmakers can share images with the world. The quality of being seen or being *visible* is no longer

the most important aspect of film; it is how we *harness* that visibility that has come to be valued and revered. I feel that the ways in which we harness the visibility of images and stories determines the level of perspective in a given film, which contributes to the cinematic and societal significance of the films that I have chosen to discuss. Perspective requires the presence of two components in a film: 1) self-awareness (an understanding of the medium and its structure), and 2) self-reflexivity (acknowledgement of this understanding)¹. A film's significance has less to do with its content, and much more to do with the relationship between a film's content and its form.

The principle of perspective is closest to the idea of "literariness" as it is defined by the Russian Formalist Method of literary construction and critique. The construction of their theories created a new understanding of the importance of form and its self-awareness in art. They decided that the presence of carefully constructed form was one of the key components of "literariness" (defined as the degree to which the form is perceptible to the reader). The strength or weakness of the form's presence would determine the level of "literariness" that a given piece of literature possessed. Perspective has a similar

¹ The distinction between self-awareness and self-reflexivity does not lie in the separation of their functions - self-awareness is a necessary quality of cinematic perspective, but is not sufficient to define cinematic perspective in itself.

function in the study of film; it is the quality that determines the potency of the narrative films that I have chosen to discuss. The components of literariness and the components necessary for effective cinematic perspective are the same. The first is "defamiliarization" and the second is "perceptible form".

In order for film to be experienced and examined, it is necessary to isolate the form from the content through the process of defamiliarization, in which automatic recognition of an object is destroyed. In literature, the defamiliarization of form allows for perceptible form, or form that draws attention to itself. In film studies, this is called self-reflexivity, and it is the main component of perspective in cinema. Self-reflexivity creates a space in which we can acknowledge and examine the relationships between the perspectives both inside and outside the world of a given film. In order to understand this relationship, we must discuss the role of the most prominent source of perspective in film: the narrator. The filmic narrator² plays a large role in the defamiliarization of cinematic form; he or she is often used as a vehicle through which the audience is both consumed (when there is no

² Film studies uses an extended sense of the term "narrator," which is defined as the consciousness through which the viewer experiences the film. The term "narrator" does not exclusively refer to voice-over in film.

defamiliarization) by and separated from the fantastical world of the film. Narratorial agency is given to the main protagonist, or the character from whose point of the view the story is told. As the mechanism with the strongest and most noticeable perspective, the narratorial vehicle makes assumptions about the audience's perception of cinematic storytelling; it expects that we embrace and trust its omniscience in our understanding of the film. Operating under this assumption allows filmmakers to draw in an audience, to mentally and emotionally bring them into the world of the film. However, in order to draw attention to cinematic form, i.e. broaden perspective, the filmmaker must also use the main protagonist to defamiliarize the viewer with the concept of central narration.

The episode entitled "Deja Vu" from "Monty Python's Flying Circus" (1970) is an example of onscreen entertainment in which self-reflexivity is used to create humorous perspective. "Flying Circus" was, in many ways, considered to be revolutionary in the way it invoked laughter through its highly self-aware narrative and visual manipulation. In philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's book, Rabelais and His World, he writes that the genre of humor and laughter was excluded from the pre-Romantic bourgeois culture as a topic that was worthy of

examination and criticism. He explains that, "within the framework of bourgeois modern culture and aesthetics," the views of humor and laughter were distorted, and thus interpreted and examined within inaccurate and very narrowly-defined parameters. These parameters excluded what Bakhtin refers to as "folk humor," a part of which he calls "ritual spectacle." "Flying Circus" falls into this category but, as film critic Marcia Landy argues, the humor in and structure of "Monty Python's Flying Circus" was revolutionary in the world of comedic television, and is certainly worthy of examination and criticism. The show was unique for its time, because it was one of the first televised forms of entertainment that used self-awareness and self-reflexive elements to create a comedic experience in which the audience was just as involved as the show's characters.

The television medium was relatively new to the public when "Flying Circus" aired in 1970, and the Pythons' understanding and comedic manipulation of the medium was advanced for their time. Television shows lent a feeling of consistency and comfort to viewers; the weekly scheduled showings, familiar characters, and eventual linear plot progressions, were all becoming a part of viewers' daily or weekly schedules. The Pythons seemed to be aware of this phenomenon, and I feel that "Flying Circus"

intentionally worked to keep audiences off-balance. This displays a clear self-awareness, and also draws viewer attention to the show's (and in the broader sense, television's) structure and form.

In the beginning of the "flying lessons" sketch, for example, two of the characters travel through different shots and settings before they arrive at the office in which the "flying lessons" are held. The jumping from location to location is a self-reflexive technique, as it explicitly calls attention to the relationship between reality and television, and the limitations of both. This sequence is reminiscent of Buster Keaton's 1924 silent film "Sherlock Jr.," in which Keaton becomes a character in a film within the film. There is a scene in which Keaton takes a short detour from the plot of the "fake" "Sherlock Jr." film and travels from setting to setting, falling into different scenes as he tries to navigate his way through the "fake" film. The self-reflexivity in "Sherlock Jr." comments on the physical and mental limitations of both the characters within the diegesis of the film and the film's spectators, and the sequence in "Flying Circus" works to do the same.

When we finally reach the office in which the "flying lessons" are held, it is brought into question whether the instructor is actually flying, or if he is on a wire. It is

obvious to the viewer that the man is being held in the air by a wire, because 1) in reality, it is impossible for humans to fly unaided, and 2) the wire is very obviously visible. The visibility of the wire exposes the limitations of the character's capability within the unrealistic world of television and film. This example of self-awareness and self-reference works to empower the viewer, which involves the audience in such a way that makes the show's comedic experience more universal. Because the viewer knows that the wire is there, his or her omniscience makes it even more amusing when the character refuses to acknowledge that the wire exists.

Another technique that is often employed in "Flying Circus" is the interruption of the narrator during a scene. The narrator's voice is not within the diegesis of the actual sketch, thus the voice-overed commentary/narration disrupts the viewer's experience of the film and, instead, draws attention to its form and the presence of a narratorial voice. The presence of narration and commentary reminds us that we are watching a sketch, not a real-life story.

Ben Affleck's most recent film, "Argo" (2012), is another filmic work that exhibits a strong use of perceptible form to create powerful cinematic effect. The film takes place during the 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis, and tells the story of how CIA

operative Tony Mendez rescues six US diplomats from Tehran under the pretense of location-scouting for a fake Hollywood science fiction film entitled "Argo". It opens with a voice-over narration that tells the story of the conflict in Iran. The narration is accompanied by a series of images, many of which are taken from real documented videos of the crisis, and some of which are cartoon drawings of different scenes in the story on what appears to be a cinematic story board. The opening is striking, as it immediately aligns the factual historical occurrences with the telling and production of cinematic anecdote. The seriousness of the story is not compromised, but it sets us up to understand the events that follow as a story that is being told, not only a recounting of historical occurrence.

The film begins with a mixture of present-day filming and excerpts from film-documented protests at the United States embassy in Tehran. There are several smooth but clear transitions between the two filmings, which draws attention to the fact that the events are being captured by a camera. As the story moves from the Iranian civilians outside of the embassy to the people inside of the building, Affleck uses a variety of different shots and angles that not only help to tell the story, but also remind us that we are watching a film. The first type

of shot that he uses is a close angle shot. Once we see inside of the embassy, there are many close angle shots of the characters' eyes and hands. The use of the close angle can be recognized as a technique often found in noir films (a genre of film in which self-reflexivity is widely used); it instills a sense of anxiety and feeling of being trapped in the viewer. As the protesters close in on the embassy building, the camera mirrors their actions by closing in on the characters' faces and hands as they anxiously wait for the protesters to break in. The second type of shot consistently used is the steady overhead shot, which is shown in conjunction with several different shaky, handheld shots of the people inside and outside of the embassy building. The steady overhead shot provides a more spectacular view of the protest; we only see a large group of people crowding around the building, trying to overtake it. Inside, however, we watch through the eyes of a handheld camera as US officials rush to prepare weapons, protect Iranian people within the embassy, burn confidential documents, and flee to safety. Because the handheld camera is not representing or attached to a particular narratorial point of view, its shakiness reminds us that we are watching something that is being filmed. The two types of shots juxtaposed allow for reinforcement - making evident - of the film form. The

combination of the two types of shots effectively tells us the story, while simultaneously drawing attention to the fact that we are watching the story unfold through the lens of a camera.

As the embassy is infiltrated by protesters, six people manage to flee through a back door and make their way to safety. As they exit the building, a soft piano melody plays, while the chanting and rioting is still heard in the background. The use of musical scoring during a dramatic series of events does not detract from the intensity of the scene, but it gives us the feeling that the sequence has been cinematically enhanced. It is obvious that the music is not within the diegesis of the film, but it does not completely remove the viewer from the world of the film, because the chaotic shouting can still be heard in the background. The relative simplicity and sadness in the scoring conveys a sense of emptiness, fear, and loss. This is a technique that is often used in narrative film; the musical score is used to represent or reinforce specific emotional narratives. In this case, the emotional effect of the score is in direct contrast with the chaos viewed on the screen. By contrasting the scoring with the sounds and images of a very real, unromanticized situation, viewer attention is drawn to the film form. The common Hollywood technique of using musical scoring to convey emotion is used again at the end of the film,

when the escapees have made it safely onto the plane back to America and the screen switches back and forth between the escapees and the Hollywood producers hugging on a studio lot upon hearing the good news. The grand orchestral scoring in the scene is fitting for the images of the producers, and also mirrors the relief celebrated by the escapees amongst other passengers on the plane. Again, the glamorous Hollywood-esque scoring draws attention to the fact that we are watching a film, a story being told. However, it is important to note that at the end of the movie (when the escapees are on the plane), the scoring draws attention to the form by echoing what is seen on the screen (feelings of relief and happiness), while in the first example (when the escapees are leaving the embassy), the scoring makes the form more evident by acting, not as echo, but as counterpoint to the images on the screen.

"Argo" concludes with an implied message that cinema is a universal art, that its ability to communicate and tell stories across different cultures and backgrounds is unique to the film medium. This idea is most obviously represented in an exchange at the end of the film, when the escapees are on the final and most difficult leg of their journey back to the US. The six escapees and Tony Mendez are asked to step into a holding room for questioning and inspection before they board the plane. The

scene is set up with several shots of the airport; it is obvious that there are language and cultural barriers that prevent clear communication amongst passengers, pilots, and the airport staff. The officials that bring Mendez and the escapees in for questioning are unable to speak much English, making it hard for both parties to communicate. Mendez attempts to explain that they are Americans visiting Iran for the location scouting of their film, but it is not until one of the escapees begins to mime out the story of "Argo" that the officials listen. With a nod towards one of the most widely known science fiction films in Hollywood history (the third installment of George Lucas' "Star Wars" trilogy, "Return of the Jedi"), the escapee begins to act out the story with gestures and sound effects, as Mendez shows the officials the story boards for the film. After the story is told, they are permitted to leave and the escapees are able to return safely to the US. This last scene self-referential in that it mimics a scene from another well-known sci-fi movie; in "Return of the Jedi", the character C3-PO mimes the heroes' stories to the Ewoks (an army of small teddy bear-esque creatures), explaining why they need the Ewoks' help in an impending war against the evil Empire. Because the Ewoks and the heroes speak very little of the same language, it is ultimately C3-PO's gesturing and sound effects that help the two parties

communicate and join forces to defeat evil. The similarity between the scene in "Jedi" and in the scene in "Argo" reinforces the idea that storytelling is a powerful way to bridge a communication gap between people of different backgrounds and cultures, and reminds us of the importance and significance of "Argo" and, by association, science fiction film as the vehicle through which the escapees are able to return home safely.

It is also important to note that this scene is revealing not only in its self-referentiality, but also in its self-reflexivity. Without actually showing us the "Argo" film, Affleck manages to give us a film within a film, a story within a story. We never actually see fake "Argo", we only watch it as it is acted out and told by people, thus reiterating the idea that film promotes and facilitates communication, that cinema and storytelling is a language that is universally understood. The multiple references to science fiction film are in themselves a nod towards self-reflexivity: science fiction is one of the most artificial of film forms, and is therefore one of the genres that draws the most attention to filmic form. The stark contrast between allusion to artificial film form and historically-based plot reinforces self-reflexivity in the film. Once again, Affleck draws the viewers attention to the existence

of the film medium within the film itself; he defamiliarizes the film form in the context of a truly remarkable story in order to further our understanding, and even our reverence, of cinema and its ability to facilitate and promote communication in our lives.

II: Self-reflexivity in Dramatic Film

In George Wilson's essay, "Narration in Light," he discusses the role of the narrator as the following: "A coherent stretch of narration embodies assumptions about how its narrated content is to be transmitted to an audience and about how the audience is to respond, cognitively and emotionally, to that content." He goes on to describe the "epistemic base", saying that "in prose fiction, the 'epistemic base' is identified in terms of the narrator, and many of the familiar classifications of literary POV are concerned with the mediated or unmediated epistemic relations that the narrator bears to the narrated events." Because of the narrator, we tend towards the feeling that seeing is believing in film. Traditional forms of narration promise to depict a set of events, acts, and situations that turn out to have an internal explanatory coherence. The audience's familiarity with traditional forms of narration

causes audience members to be emotionally and epistemically aligned with the character who tries to solve the puzzle in the given plot. However, Wilson goes on to explain that, while this is our traditional perception of the narratorial figure in literature and film, the nature of cinema makes it "dubious that fiction film generates any comparable general and central concept of a narrating figure"; the film medium requires a more abstract notion of an "epistemic base". The expansion of the "epistemic base" is demonstrated in a film's use of self-reflexivity to defamiliarize the audience from the traditional narratorial role.

One of the ways in which films honor the more abstract idea of narration is by exposing the narrator's limitations, often by acknowledging the fact that the narrator only exists within the filmic world. Audience members still align themselves with the narrator or protagonist, but both the audience and the protagonist are forced to discover something about the narrator's personal limitations and about the limitations of the his or her situation. This method is clearly demonstrated in Hitchcock's 1959 film "North by Northwest," in which the main protagonist, Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant), embodies moral ambiguity while simultaneously garnering universal sympathy. There is very little that is genuine or sincere about his

character; he is first introduced to us as a charmer and a salesman, a protagonist that we will like, but not necessarily trust. The film tells the story of how Thornhill is mistaken for a man named "George Kaplan" and spends his time trying to escape both his and Kaplan's pasts. Thornhill becomes trapped inside the role of Kaplan, and is ultimately forced to embrace the alias when he learns that it was created to protect his love, Eve Kendall. Role play and the dichotomy between reality and illusion are two of the film's most prominent themes.

As the opening credits roll, the film opens with a graphic of a slanted grid against a striking green background. The grid is representative of the trapped-ness that Thornhill feels as the film progresses, and it is paired with agitated scoring to increase the impending anxiety that is felt in the film. The scoring (done by Bernard Hermann) includes short, repeated sequences that rise and fall, and syncopated rhythms. The syncopation in particular is a musical technique that is often used to indicate discomfort and apprehension, and here it also represents a sense of urgency and fast forward movement that is prominent throughout the film. The opening credits come to a close with a series of strong dissonant chords, indicating danger and discomfort. The piece finally ends on an inverted A minor chord, which includes the same low E with which the

overture began. It is important to note that the last chord is as reassuring as it is unsettling; it is a dominant chord (a perfect fifth up from the tonic note), which is often used to convey a sense of comfort, but it is also in a minor key, which traditionally emphasizes danger or unsettledness. The ambiguity in the overture's ending leaves us unsure of what will follow in the rest of the story. As the film continues, we discover the relevance of its opening score and why it becomes a recurring musical theme; it gives us the feeling that Thornhill is constantly being pursued, that his fate and the events that happen during the film are not within his control. This is the audience's first glimpse at the main protagonist's limitations.

The grid on the screen begins to dissolve, revealing the symmetry between the grid and a tall office building in which the windows make up the squares on the grid. The symmetry gives us a sense of the setting and the role it plays in Thornhill's story. By equating the tall city buildings with the grid, we get the sense that the city lays a trap for Thornhill, that his home and place of work are just as threatening as the unknown. This somewhat foreboding opening plays against our first Thornhill encounter, where he is portrayed as the image of control, power, and self-confidence. These contradicting themes illustrate ambiguity in the plot and indicate weakness in Thornhill's

omniscience as a narrator. We first see Thornhill walking through a busy office building with his assistant, giving her instructions on how to connect with his clients while casually and dismissively greeting colleagues as he passes them in the hallway. It is clear that he cares little about others around him and chooses to focus on himself. For example, within the first couple of minutes of our meeting him, he charmingly coerces a passenger into giving them his cab, claiming that his assistant is a "very sick lady" and that they must have the taxi immediately. Before the passenger has a chance to respond, Thornhill and his assistant have jumped in the car and taken off. It is this type of interaction that seems to be typical of Thornhill's character; his suaveness and charm make him both likable and untrustworthy for the audience. However, this type of encounter between Thornhill and the passenger also garners sympathy for his character, as it reveals his emotional isolation from other characters in the story. The sympathy gives the audience a reason to root for him that is heightened when we meet Eve Kendall, the female protagonist and Thornhill's eventual love interest.

It is made clear to the viewer that Roger Thornhill is a man of the people and of his city: he is obviously comfortable with his surroundings, and values this level of comfort. As the

film progresses, however, Hitchcock films the city and Thornhill's various surroundings in such a way that indicates that Thornhill's fear of the unknown has imposed upon him a defamiliarization of the familiar. For example, in one of the scenes where Thornhill is trying to escape, Hitchcock uses an overhead shot of the city buildings as Thornhill flees from the United Nations. The high angle of the camera reveals the complicatedness of the protagonist's escape route; it shows the city buildings as a series of stark geometric shapes and makes it look complex and unfamiliar both to the viewer and to Thornhill (see Fig. 1). The visual defamiliarization of the city from the audience and from the protagonist makes both parties feel unsure and disoriented, dramatizing the effect of the plot. The defamiliarization also echoes the feeling of uncertainty that Hitchcock wants the viewer to feel around the role of the narrator. Traditionally, a narrator's omniscience is what empowers and reassures the viewer; but here, the literal change in perspective (i.e. viewing the city from an unfamiliar overhead shot) leads to a figurative shift in the way we view perspective in the film. As is evidenced by the scene mentioned above, the effect of the narrator on the viewer is often ambiguous. At times, the narrator creates comfort and familiarity for the audience, but when the narrator is brought



Fig. 1: Overhead shot of the United Nations building as Thornhill runs to escape from the city.

forcibly into evidence or consciousness, he or she becomes an agent of perspective or defamiliarization in the film.

I have dedicated the last couple of pages to discussing elements of film form that create the effect of self-reflexivity. However, these elements are not merely functions of form, they also share qualities with the most traditional characteristics of film: plot and character. I will now discuss how, though shared with precedent art forms such as literature and theater, plot and character also take part in the creation cinematic perspective.

The overarching theme of playing a role and the importance of appearances is, in itself, self-reflexive. Cary Grant is an actor playing a role (Roger Thornhill), and his character is forced to play a role within his role (George Kaplan). There are

many allusions to the idea of playing a character within the dialogue; one of the most obvious allusions occurs during Thornhill and Vandamm's exchange in the auction scene: "Has anyone ever told you that you overplay your various roles rather severely, Mr. Kaplan?" Vandamm asks Thornhill, to which he replies, "Apparently the only performance that will satisfy you is when I play dead." Vandamm then counters with "Your very next role, you'll be quite convincing I'll assure you." The irony in this claim is that, in the next scene, Thornhill fakes his own death and succeeds, allowing him to escape temporarily from Vandamm's henchmen. He is "quite convincing" in his role and, while his role play is initially what puts him in danger, this scene shows us that it is also what ultimately saves his life. By referring to the fact that Thornhill is playing a "role" in the film, the dialogue draws attention to one of the main vehicles in narrative film structure: the characters. The dichotomous effects that role play has on Thornhill's life is an example of the use of self-reflexivity to broaden perspective and understanding in film.

While the most obvious and noticeable narratorial voices live inside the world of the film, the director or editor determines which series of shots yields the best and clearest perspective on the action for the spectator. The "real world"

perspective combined with the "film world" perspective helps to refine plot and create compelling image sequences. Wilson quotes Jean Mitry as saying "Thanks to the mobility of the camera, to the multiplicity of shots, I am everywhere at once... I know that I am in the movie theater, but I feel that I am in the world offered to my gaze, a world that I experience 'physically' while identifying myself with one or another of the characters in the drama - with all of them, alternatively. This finally means that at the movies I am both in this action and outside it, in this space and outside this space. Having the gift of ubiquity, I am everywhere and nowhere." The possession and display of the two points of view (within and outside of the diegesis) is central to film. In order to achieve perspective, however, a film must make the viewer aware of these two points of view.

The existence and awareness of the two different worlds lessens the familiarizing effect of fictional elements without weakening the film's plot. Logically, the audience knows that they are watching a fictional film, that what they see on the screen is purely illusory. However, once you are watching a film, it is often difficult to interrupt the illusion, as there are few mechanisms to remind you that what you are watching is not real. Self-reflexiveness subtly acknowledges the fantasy; it

reminds viewers of the dichotomous perspectives while reinforcing what the audience already knows, the latter half of which mitigates the startling effects of breaking illusion. Thus, self-reflexivity solves the catch-22 of fictional film: the need to draw the viewer in, while also needing to remind the audience of the outside world in order to maintain perspective.

The 1920s through the 1950s marked what is often referred to today as the "Golden Age" in Hollywood cinema. It was during that time that many films, actors and actresses, and directors that are revered in our society today established themselves as noteworthy in the film industry. The "Golden Age" took place after filmmakers had acquired a certain level of awareness around the cinematic medium; the era of silent films had ended and filmmakers were now taking full advantage of the use of lighting, editing, sound, and dialogue in their productions. Films such as "Singin' in the Rain" (1952), "All About Eve" (1950), and "Sunset Boulevard" (1950) acknowledged the transition from the relative unfamiliarity of the cinematic medium to the highly self-aware and increasingly developed understanding of filmic production that resonated throughout the industry during that time. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelley's "Singin' in the Rain" remains one of the only movie musicals to be so highly regarded by film critics and, while several musical



Fig. 2: Debbie Reynolds and Gene Kelly in "Singin' in the Rain," recording a song with the orchestra for their new "talkie."

films had been produced prior to its release ("Top Hat" (1935) with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, for example), "Singin' in the Rain" is one of the few that celebrates the film as much as it does the theater medium. The film is set in the late 1920s, a time when Hollywood was making its transition from silent to sound films. It depicts the difficulty of turning silent films into "talkies," and comically addresses the struggle that many well-known silent film actors and actresses faced during the transition period. Movie musicals in particular contribute to the category of films that most obviously draws attention to filmic form, as they highlight the difference between "real world" representation and imaginative musical vignettes and interludes. The transition from real world scripting to sudden outburst of song, while used logically plot-wise, is obviously

not an accurate representation of real world happenings or expressions of thought and emotion.

Directed by Joseph Mankiewicz, "All About Eve" is a film that blurs the lines of separation between reality and the theatrical world. The development of Margo and Eve's lives together as women of the stage captures the struggle of the actress in pursuit of Hollywood success; she must stay true to herself, while also becoming society's idea of what she should be. The conflict of the film lies in the confusion between the two worlds, and the trick is to resist falling prey to the romance of theatrical illusion. The structure of the movie itself works to trap the viewer; the personalities of the supporting characters set us up to fall in love with Eve Harrington, but her true personality is slowly revealed and, as we attempt to free ourselves from the vacuum of the theatrical world, we, like Eve, find ourselves completely immersed in its drama. "All About Eve" tells the story of a young woman who aspires to become a famous actress, following the footsteps of Broadway star Margo Channing. When we first meet Eve Harrington, she seems naive and unthreatening, but we soon come to understand her truly manipulative and devious nature. We come to view Eve as a more mild version of the femme fatale character in traditional noir films, the similarity being in that both Eve

and other femme fatales become trapped in the worlds that they have created. This was the perfect type of character around which to center the film's plot; the use of the femme fatale trope to invoke a feeling of being trapped in the world of the film and its audience is a technique that is not only self-referencing, but also moves the plot forward.

The film was nominated for 14 Academy Awards upon release, winning six of the awards (including Best Picture). It was based on the 1946 *Cosmopolitan* magazine story by Mary Orr, "The Wisdom of Eve", which tells the story of a young actress who manipulates new friends to find fame. Mankiewicz read the story as a commentary on the American dream and the country's fascination with the "self-made man". Placing his interpretation of the story in the context of budding Hollywood fame added a layer of self-reflexivity to the film that allowed for a greater understanding of Eve's predicament.

The film leads the audience in a circle; we end up where we began, the roles now reversed as Eve steps into Margo's shoes and acquires a protégé: her own "Eve Harrington." The cyclical nature of the plot is a crucial component of the film's form, and one of the cinematic components used to better illustrate this characteristic is the recurrence of musical theme; it serves as our guide throughout the movie.

The score's remarkableness can be attributed to its unobtrusive, but impactful nature in the film. Its consistent, albeit small, musical presence tells us how to feel and what to think. It provides us with both reality and theatricality, highlighting the very genuine desires of a young girl longing for stardom while also exposing the selfish truth about her pursuit of success. "All About Eve" opens with a series of credits set to the majestic sound of a full orchestra playing something reminiscent of an overture typically heard at the beginning of a play or musical. The music plants in our minds the idea that we are about to watch a show or theatrical performance. We are subtly being introduced to the idea of the world as a stage, a sentiment that is echoed by Eve and the actions she takes in her quest for stardom.

The first scene is narrated by fictional theater critic Addison DeWitt, at a dinner where Eve is being presented the Sarah Siddons Award. The voiceover is non-diegetic, and even the audience is kept in the dark as to which character is speaking. The effect is slightly unsettling; our initial lack of knowledge about the narrator allows us to trust him as an objective and omniscient presence. However, as we flash back to a year prior, and the narrator switches from Addison to Karen, we realize that Addison is just another character, that we can and should

question the objectiveness and therefore, accuracy, in his telling of the story. The manipulation of voice over humanizes the role of omniscient narrator, and draws attention to narratorial form. In a sense, this treatment of the narrator leaves room for another presence to claim the power of narratorial omniscience: the musical scoring.

Music is used sparingly throughout the film, as most of the sound is provided by either dialogue or voiceover. When it is used, however, it serves to either emphasize the romanticization of a character's speech, or to provide a heightened sense of drama in scenes as they would be romanticized in a play or a musical. For example, during Eve's first monologue in Margo's dressing room, the musical scoring underneath her words creates a dream-like effect. As she begins her story, the violins start their melody in a major key, sliding between octaval A's. The music is sweet and uplifting, simple enough not to distract from her words, but ornamented enough to enhance the romanticization of her story, which we later discover is mostly comprised of lies. In this scene, this particular use of musical theme allows us to indulge in Eve's dream but, a couple of scenes later, it warns us of her insincerity. In the scene when Eve tells Margo that she sent a birthday telegram to Bill, for example, we observe Margo's suspicion for the first time. The scene ends

with a medium shot of Margo exchanging a sudden glance with her housekeeper, a look of dark skepticism on her face. In the scoring, we hear the music rise in volume, and Eve's "dreamy" theme comes back, but this time we hear it in a different key. The octave switch is now between a B and a B, followed by a descending G, F#, E, lending a more macabre and foreboding color to the score. The shift in the music tells the audience that something bad is going to happen, that we should be wary of Eve's intentions.

One of the most important scenes of the film depicts Karen and Margo stuck in the car, and Margo expresses her honest insecurities about her heavily spotlit job as an actress for the first time. This is a turning point in the film in terms of plot and form; not only does the dialogue allow us to understand Margo in a different light, the musical theme becomes both non-diegetic and diegetic. The crossover between the diegetic world and the non-diegetic world is highly self-reflexive, as it uses cinematic form to remind us how easy it is to blur the lines between filmic fantasy and harsh reality. Margo briefly turns on the radio and, upon hearing the saccharine sweetness of what the audience recognizes as the recurring musical theme, promptly switches it off saying that she "detests cheap sentiment." She takes a few moments to share her buried feelings, revealing that

she longs to be loved as Margo Channing, "not *Margo Channing*." She then turns the music back on, saying that "all females have the same career... being a woman." The return of the musical theme indicates that Margo's thoughts have come back to the world of the theater where, as an actress, she must uphold a certain facade in order to be successful. The scoring indicates a return to the theatrical, the romanticized. However, it also illustrates Margo's understanding that, for the first time, she realizes that the theatrical *is* her reality, that she must change her ways as both a person and an actress in order to become the woman she wants to be. The switching off and on of the music at key points during her monologue works as an aural representation of Margo's transformation.

The film ends with the image of a new young ingenue, Phoebe, admiring her reflection in Eve's mirror as she secretly slips into Eve's cape. We see her reflection in multiples as she peers into the three-way mirror, and the music is raised to full volume. The effect is extremely grand and fantastical; the orchestra plays a very full-sounding version of the theme, returning to the major key and once again hitting octaval A's. This symbolic passing of the theme from Eve to Phoebe signifies both a beginning and an ending for the two actresses. The beauty of the shot and the score of this final scene leaves us with a

strong sense of impermanence, the message being that costume and facade can always be taken from you, and that genuine love and a grasp of reality are what is truly worth pursuing.



Fig. 3 and 4: Ending scene of "All About Eve" as Phoebe dons Eve's gown and looks at her reflection in the three-way mirror.

CHAPTER 2

A Light in the Dark: Self-Reflexivity in Noir Cinema

Noir cinema, while difficult to strictly define, is a genre that represents darkness and moral ambiguity. It explores the world of the obsessive and alienated, often manipulating narratives so as to garner audience sympathy for the criminals in the story. The genre's vision is often distinguished by its characterizations and narratives, both of which are generally translated into visual patterns: mysterious lighting, Venetian blinds, and dangerous looking women are just a few examples of characteristics that have all come to be known over time as noir tropes.

Traditional noir was most popular in Hollywood around the 1940s and 1950s, when directors such as Billy Wilder, Orson Welles, and Howard Hawks produced many of the films that are considered to be "classic noirs" today. The genre was first introduced as consisting solely of B films; the films were often made on a smaller budget than classic Hollywood films and were based off of hard-boiled detective novels written by authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Classic noirs worked to address the social anxieties of the 40s and 50s, and their macabre portrayals of Hollywood and society were in direct

contrast with the many musicals and optimistic films that appeared during Hollywood's "Golden Age." Themes of insecurity, moral laxity, crime, rebellion, and mistrust were prominent in the noir world, and the emphasis on "society's evils" on the screen juxtaposed with the anxieties of wartime in real life aimed to bring a sense of fear and foreboding to viewers. The term "noir" was coined by French film critic Nino Frank in 1946, after the French word for "black" or "dark." The genre was appropriately named for its visual and thematic darkness, a style that was notably different from the traditionally theatrical optimism of Hollywood.

The sardonic nature of noir screenplays and the visual representations of moral ambiguity cast a satiric light, while the focus on unconventional protagonists and the cinematographically self-aware qualities draw attention to the form of the film. As mentioned previously, drawing attention to film form allows viewers to remember that they are watching a story being told, that what they view on the screen is not happening in real life. Self-reflexivity works to epistemically distance the viewer from the diegesis of the film, and demonstrates a thorough understanding of the limitations of the film medium. Self-reflexivity is particularly effective in noir cinema, as its cinematic function mirrors and reinforces many

thematic elements of the noir genre. When noir cinema draws attention to the limitations of the film medium, it often represents the mental or physical limitations of the main protagonist's situation. It also illustrates the limitations on human morality.

Prior to the noir genre, the traditional Hollywood movie-watcher was accustomed to the following cinematic conventions: 1) linear or logical plot development, 2) a "good" protagonist, 3) unthreatening female characters, and 4) optimistic resolution. These conventions are all elements of the conventional Hollywood film form; noir made a practice of effectively opposing those traditions, which drew attention to these conventions and their absence in noir (which contributed to an increased level of self-awareness in the film medium).

Howard Hawks' "The Big Sleep" (1946) uses self-reflexivity to both narrate the film and elicit strong emotional reaction from the audience. The film does not have an obvious narrator, but the cinematography and the diegesis guide us through the plot of the film via the eyes of private detective Phillip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart). Marlowe's character acts as the vehicle through which Hawks executes narration and garners sympathy from the audience. Towards the end of the film, there is a scene in which Marlowe goes to Jones' office and Jones is

killed. I feel that this sequence is the only one in the film that offers audience members the chance to have any true emotional reaction; it is the only murder that we actually witness over the course of the film.

The sequence begins with Marlowe walking through the hallway of Jones' office building. The low lighting and ominous scoring at the beginning of the scene indicate to us that Marlowe may be in danger. The orchestra is playing the same minor interval repeatedly, giving us a sense of impending threat. It is also important to note that the light seems to follow Marlowe as he walks down the hallway and approaches Jones' door; the story is clearly being told from his point of view, as we are only able to see him and what he sees. The use of a long angle tracking shot shows us that, as Marlowe continues to walk forward, what he leaves behind automatically falls into darkness. It gives us a sense of inevitable danger: being bound by the light, we (and Marlowe) are unable to turn around and walk away. The light also mimics the theatricality of a spotlight, which draws attention to Marlowe's function as the main protagonist in the film.

As Marlowe approaches Jones' office, we see Jones' silhouette in the window. In the shot, we see a side view of both Marlowe's and Jones' silhouette in the same frame. Their

height and clothing are similar and, from the viewer's perspective, they could be the same person. Perhaps this is Hawks' way of telling his audience to assimilate Jones with Marlowe. As the film's hero figure, Marlowe's character carries a certain cachet with the audience and, at this point in the film, we are highly invested in his survival. Because we have only known Jones for a short period of time, however, it is assumed that his death would have less impact. In order for the viewer to feel the impact of the impending murder, Hawks creates a shot in which we visually connect Marlowe with Jones. In addition, the shot with Jones' silhouette imitates the look of basic images being projected by onto a well-lit screen. This is another example in which self-reflexivity flirts with thematic elements of noir; Jones is trapped within the parameters of the room but, as a filmic character, he is also trapped within the parameters of the cinematic screen.

As the scene continues we watch Jones from a doorway, behind which Marlowe is hiding. It is a close angle shot; all we see is Jones sitting on the couch, and he is framed by his murderer's gun and the doorframe. The tightness of the shot lends a heightened sense of claustrophobia and feeling of trappedness that is characteristic of noir cinema; visually, the audience is just as trapped as Jones is.

During Jones' actual death, he takes the drink, and we see his face form a painful smile that he manages to squeeze out before doubling over. The relatively large amount of time dedicated to his death in the film makes it even more shocking and upsetting as we watch him die. We are forced to watch him suffer before he dies; there is no loud gun shot followed by a scene where we find him dead. The ambient noise at this moment is important to note; as the murderer walks out, he slams the door, and Jones topples forward in his seat. The slam is jarring to the audience; it is an aural substitution for the absence of the gun shot that the audience originally assumed would kill Jones. After the door slams, Marlowe rushes into the room and opens it, a metaphorical demonstration of his potential ability (as the main protagonist and resident hero) and desire to reverse the tragic death that has just taken place. It is then even more upsetting that, when he opens the door, Marlowe fails to catch the murderer, thus emphasizing the feeling of hopelessness in the situation. Our brief, but intimate encounter with death in "The Big Sleep," and the way it is cinematographically illustrated draws attention to the fact that, while justice usually prevails in the traditional Hollywood film, noir cinema invites us to acknowledge the perspective that the just and moral are not always honored.

In Fritz Lang's "Scarlet Street" (1946), there is a sequence where two lovers, Christopher Cross and Katherine March (Kitty) interact in an intimate setting for the first time. It is easy for audience members to recognize Kitty's beauty, but her youth and good looks seem to have a particularly powerful effect on Chris, which creates an uneven power dynamic between the two characters. His blind trust in her is also illustrative of the key themes in the film: a lack of perspective and an inability to self-reflect when it comes to matters of extreme infatuation. Throughout the film, Lang uses self-reflexive visual cues to remind us of the importance of perspective.

The ambience of the room is very picturesque; it reminds the viewer of a painted still-life. The table at which Chris and Kitty are seated is situated next to the window, and is adorned with a checkered tablecloth, several perfectly bloomed flowers in a vase, a lit candle, and pre-set table settings. Relaxing, but cheerful classical music is also being played, though it is unclear whether it is diegetic or non-diegetic. It is also important to note that the restaurant is below street level; it feels as though they have left the eerie, lonely streets of the city and disappeared into this happy, picturesque world. Though they had no prior events that required them to be, both characters are dressed up: Chris is wearing a suit and Kitty is

wearing a silky black dress. All of these components are used to paint of picture what, on the surface, appears to be the epitome of the perfect first date.

In "The Big Sleep" and many other noir films, close angle shots are often used to create a claustrophobic effect. In this scene, however, the shots themselves are not tight, but the cluttered foreground in each medium shot of Chris or Kitty perpetuates the feeling of claustrophobia that is characteristic of noir film. The presence of the window on Kitty's right gives us more room to breathe; it adds a feeling of expansiveness to the frame, because it alludes to a world beyond the restaurant. However, the effect of the window is ambiguous: outside of the window is dark, which gives us a sense of being closed in. The window is also symbolically significant, as it takes the place of the mirror on the wall that we see in the other scenes throughout the film. The mirrors and windows add another dimension of depth to the frame, but they also symbolize self-reflection. Even though it is dark outside, the audience cannot actually see Chris' reflection in the window. This implies that his sense of perspective has been skewed or clouded; his inability to self-reflect prevents him from seeing Kitty for the femme fatale that she truly is.

The interaction between Kitty and Chris is important to note in this scene, because it offers a playful, but dark representation of the power dynamics at play in the film. This scene is one of the few times that we see them interact, unimpeded by the presence or influence of others. At first look, it seems as though Chris holds a lot of the power; his age and assumed experience give him authority over Katherine. Katherine's nickname is very childlike in comparison; she immediately tells Chris to call her "Kitty" instead of "Miss March." Despite these surface-level portrayals, however, their personalities gradually reveal the complete opposite to be true. Chris' name is also symbolic, because it is indicative of his naiveté. His full name is "Chris Cross," a playful homonym for "criss cross." This is visually represented in the opening scene, when his boss (J.J. Hogarth) asks Chris if he is superstitious, and Chris replies "no," while the camera pans down to reveal that his fingers are crossed at his side. Finger crossing is a classic, but immature gesture often associated with young children, and is used to indicate when someone is speaking what they claim is the truth, but in reality is a lie. Ironically, Chris' youthful naiveté, immature demeanor, and innocent love are what lead to his eventual emotional demise.

Throughout Chris and Kitty's dinner, Chris' demeanor is very childish. First, his physical build looks like that of a child, as he is visibly shorter than the other men in the film. Second, his way of speaking is much less self-assured than Kitty's. He tells Kitty that she "shouldn't be alone in the streets so late at night," with what is meant to be a fatherly and slightly authoritative air, but the tone with which it is said does not seem to suit Chris, and he looks uncomfortable with his attempt to take charge. He feebly shakes his finger at Kitty, but his facial expressions reveal his obvious captivation with her youth and beauty. Cross' attempt at authority is also undermined by the casual ease with which Kitty brushes him off, saying that she had gotten off late from work that night.

Kitty's demeanor gives off the impression that she is independent and in control. While Chris repeatedly looks down at the end of his sentences, Kitty maintains eye contact throughout the conversation. Her apparent lack of concern for or interest in Chris' infatuation with her is what makes her powerful in this sequence, and the unevenness in the dynamic disrupts the picturesque image of their first date. Her evasion of Chris' questions is a clear indication that she is lying, but this goes unnoticed by Chris. It should also be noted that she does not ask Chris to light her cigarette; she does it herself. In many

other noir films, the female characters ask for a cigarette light as a way to indicate interest in a man, or further a sexual pursuit. In Billy Wilder's "Double Indemnity" (1944) for example, Walter Neff repeatedly lights Phyllis' cigarettes as a symbol of male and sexual dominance. Kitty, however, leans over and lights her cigarette on the candle that is burning on their table, a metaphorical indication that she does not need Chris.

One of the main themes in the film is the idea of perspective, and Chris and Kitty's lack thereof. The idea is first mentioned by Johnny in the literal sense, when he comments on Chris' paintings saying that he has "trouble with perspective." He means that his paintings lack depth in their features, but his comment also speaks to Chris' lack of self-awareness concerning Kitty. This is visually represented by the repeated emphasis of mirrors and windows on the walls in different scenes. This element adds literal depth to the cinematic frames, but is also represents the different perspectives from which each scene can be understood. In the opening scene, for example, there is a large mirror on the wall and one of the shots captures both the real dinner table at which the men are sitting as well as the mirrored one. The audience sees the men from two different angles, just as they also see the characters from two different angles. Kitty is both

captivating and dangerous, but Chris is too enthralled with her beauty to see that she is using him. Johnny is both suave and manipulative, but Kitty is so besotted with her love for him that she only sees a man whom she thinks feels the same love for her.

The idea of deceptive appearances is also manifested in the painting theme that is used throughout the film. The paintings are key to the plot, but the idea of tableau is also prominent in the cinematography. There are many instances in which the characters are framed by the camera in ways that make them look as though they are in paintings. The self-reflexive reference to perspective in art draws attention to perspective in the film. The picturesque ambience in the restaurant, for example, is a seemingly perfect tableau on the surface, but the situation is not exactly what it seems to be. The restaurant table is set like a painting, but the viewers know that there is something wrong with the situation because of the suspiciousness of Kitty's character. Another example of this is at the end of the dinner sequence, when Kitty is at the top of the stairs leading to the door of her apartment building. Chris is looking up at her, and she is framed by the open doorway, almost as though she were in a painting. In Chris' mind, she is both emotionally and

physically on a pedestal. This image is later echoed in dialogue and plot, when Chris asks if he can paint Kitty's portrait.

At the end of the film, all that is left of Kitty is her portrait and her voice that repeatedly echoes inside Chris' head. He murders her out of hurt and anger upon discovering who she really is, the implication being that, once Chris gained a sense of perspective, it drove him to insanity. "Scarlet Street" is self-reflexive because it references art's ability to portray one view or perspective, to permanently fix certain images in our minds. The film reminds us that it is important to remember to look at both sides, to not be blinded by fascination or infatuation. The dark humor in Chris' childishness and limited perspective is echoed in the film's self-reflexivity, and the inevitability of Chris' doom sets the stage for a highly satirical plot from the very beginning of the film.

From the satirization of Hollywood stardom in "Sunset Boulevard" (1950) to the ironic portrayal of nuclear power in "Kiss Me Deadly" (1955), noir films brought to light the anxieties that often went undiscussed in our society. Many of these anxieties have been addressed since the 1940s and 50s, but the themes of death, alienation, and rebellion are still portrayed and satirized in present-day films. Through self-reflexivity, the noir genre mourns for, shudders with, and

smirks at the limitations of the human condition, and audiences are still captivated by these themes today.

The noir tradition has been carried on through the years, first in the form of the neo-noir genre and, more recently, in the modern day versions of gangster and hard-boiled detective films. Neo-noir films were produced in the 1970s through the 1990s and, while they displayed the same cinematic techniques and traditional noir themes, they veered away from the social anxieties of crime and alienation as their main focal points and addressed more modern anxieties such as sexual orientation. In neo-noirs "Bound" (1996) and "Mulholland Dr." (2001) for example, gangster types were replaced by members of the mob, and femme fatales seduced female protagonists instead of male detective figures. In today's post neo-noir period, traditional noir is often represented in the form of filmic tropes; darker films tend to include a preponderance of close angle shots, and themes of the femme fatale and the morally ambiguous protagonist are very commonly used. Christopher Nolan's "The Dark Knight" series is a prime example of modern day noir-esque cinematic manipulation. While it is my opinion that Nolan's style is generally more spectacle than it is plot or characters, it is apparent that he uses noir tropes to express the danger in

Gotham City, and to further emphasize the hero's (Batman's) moral ambiguity.

Shane Black's 2005 film, "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang," is both a nod towards hard-boiled detective film and a parody of the classic Hollywood culture. It uses hard-boiled detective story tropes and self-reflexive elements to create a humorous noir parody. Its self-reflexive narrative provides commentary on the often unrealistic, but alluring quality of movies; the film highlights the lack of reality by acknowledging common noir cinematic form, thus undermining its effect and bringing its falsity to our attention. The use of noir elements adds another dimension of self-reflexivity to the parody, as it reminds us of a film genre that aimed to push the boundaries of classic Hollywood film. Even though "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang" does not comment self-consciously on its status as a noir, it openly acknowledges its function as a Hollywood movie by exaggerating and correcting the elements it uses that are specific to the film medium. Through his casting, score, and cinematographic choices, Black invites his audience to step behind the lens, asking us to experience a world that often struggles to balance fantasy with reality.

One of the film's most powerful choices is its self-correcting narrative, a quality that not only represents the way

in which Hollywood has the powerful ability to edit and touch-up what is meant to represent reality, it also invites the audience to sit next to the editor's chair and watch as the narrator rewinds, fasts forward, explains, and splices together particular scenes. The title of the film itself evokes the idea of film criticism and review. It was named after famous film critic Pauline Kael's 1968 anthology of essays, Kiss Kiss Bang Bang, though the screenplay was based on Brett Halliday's mystery novel, Bodies Are Where You Find Them. Critics, such as A.O. Scott of the *New York Times*, have argued that, while the film is a clever throwback to classic noir and evocative of a "different era" it has "no particular reason for existing; [it is just] a flashy, trifling, throwaway whose surface cleverness masks a self-infatuated credulity." Former *Village Voice* film critic, J. Hoberman, agreed when he wrote, "I can't say ["Kiss Kiss Bang Bang"] made me laugh much, but then when a movie is so taken with its own jokes, it hardly needs an audience." It is true that the film is a continuous string of inside jokes, but the jokes poke fun at the film's maker: Hollywood. Its self-awareness and casual treatment of Hollywood cinematic form can be taken simply as good fun, but it can also be observed as a critique. This is accomplished via our main protagonist, Harry Lockhart (Robert Downey Jr.). Like many noir directors before

him, Black chooses to break the fourth wall with a voice over of Harry's internal monologue in order to create a more intimate relationship between the viewer and the protagonist. In classic noir films such as "Double Indemnity" (1950), this technique was often used to better assimilate the audience to a main character of questionable moral standing. It allowed the director to manipulate the narrative in such a way that caused the moviegoer to sympathize with the criminal. In "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang," this is accomplished through clever scripting, but it is also represented in Black's careful choice to cast Robert Downey Jr. as Harry Lockhart. Downey's very public history with substance abuse and personal scandal are offset by his innate likability, both of which are quintessential components of the modern-day noir protagonist (as opposed to the classic noir protagonists who, while likable, often lacked intriguing backstory).

"Kiss Kiss Bang Bang" begins with Harry's voice, as he introduces himself and the rest of the party guests to the audience. The first shot we see of him is from the party host's pool; the camera is positioned in such a way that we are looking up at Harry from underwater when we hear his voice. It is a tribute to Billy Wilder's 1950 noir, "Sunset Boulevard," where the opening shot also takes place in a pool underwater and the protagonist, Joe Gillis, narrates and explains the scene as an

offscreen narrator. However, while the opening shot of "Sunset Boulevard" shows us the morbid image of a dead man floating below the surface of the pool, "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang" takes a much more light-hearted approach. It is important to note that, before we actually see the shot of the pool, we hear the beginning of a jazzy version of the classic holiday song, "Sleigh Ride." Not only is this indicative of a festive and more cheerful opening to the film, it is also a play on the use of brass and string instruments and dissonant chords in classic noir scores. Traditionally, when there is something jarring, important, or alarming on the screen, it is denoted with a dissonant chord in the brass, or a crashing of strings. This version of "Sleigh Ride" is being played by a more modern-sounding keyboard, with subtle string accompaniment. When the screen reveals the underwater pool shot of Harry for the first time, there is a brief interlude in the music and the strings play a quiet, but noticeable, dissonant chord before continuing with the holiday tune. As the chord plays, we also see Harry standing on the edge of the pool, circling his arms dangerously as though he is about to jump in. The interlude is suggestive of noir film and indicates that something about the situation is not quite right, but the quick transition back to the party undermines the potential threat that the film initially poses.

The camera quickly leaves the water and we are able to observe Harry and see the party from his point of view for the first time. His voice is a welcoming presence to the audience; the casual emptiness in Downey's vocal inflections are the perfect combination of friendly and cavalier as he explains the Hollywood world that has been thrust upon him. To us viewers as outsiders, it is important that we feel included in the world of the film. Harry presents himself to us as both likable and an outsider, two qualities that draw us in from the start of the film. "Now that I'm in LA I go to parties," he explains. "Y'know, the kind where if a girl is named 'Jill' she spells it J-Y-L-L-E, that bullshit." It is a witty, albeit sarcastic statement about Hollywood culture, and it separates him from the rest of the loud, well-connected, beautifully dressed guests at the party. As he introduces himself as our "narrator" and welcomes us to the party and to LA, Harry's voice takes on an even more sarcastic tone that invokes a feeling of overly-glamorous pretentiousness. The camera shows us a shot of his feet, where we watch as he dips the toes of his left shoe in the water. This is meant as a wink to the audience; it is a literal and figurative representation of his dipping one toe in and testing the Hollywood waters.



Fig. 5: Hollywood party that Harry Lockhart attends in "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang."

The rest of the sequence consists of Harry's voice over introducing us to the different characters in his story. We are shown many more shots of the party, including an image of girls in bikinis swimming underwater in the outdoor pool. The cheerful music and swimming at Christmastime (which, everywhere but Hollywood, means colder weather) lend an almost whimsical feeling to the scene; we are being shown the many ways in which the world of Hollywood has the ability to make magical or paradisiacal things happen. As Harry continues to narrate, we see shots of him and his interactions with the other guests at the party. At one point in the narrative, he lights a cigarette, only to be waved away in disgust by a group of young party-goers. He continues, saying, "By now you're probably wondering how I wound up here, or maybe not, maybe you're wondering how Silly Putty picks shit up from comic books...." Downey purposefully emphasizes the "I" in his sentence, an effect that

aurally separates him from the rest of the LA crowd at the same time as he is being visually separated from the conspicuously young and healthy crowd via his cigarette.

Not only does the tone of Harry's narrative make him easily likable and relatable, his voice over is also self-editing in nature (Harry often "pauses" the film to "rewind," retell, or edit out parts of his story), a technique that has two effects: the first being that it allows the audience to feel as though they are behind the lens editing the film with Harry, and the second being that it furthers the idea that he is an outsider and we can trust him and know that he understands us as viewers. The first time he self edits is about twenty minutes into the film, when the party sequence continues after some brief historical context. We meet "Gay" Perry (played by Val Kilmer) for the first time, and we witness his and Harry's first exchange. For the purpose of the film, it is a very important scene, because it signals the beginning of an important and lasting friendship that plays a large role in the movie plot. Harry's voice over, however, feels otherwise. "Ok, I'm sorry," he interjects as he pauses and then fasts forward the film reel. "That was a terrible scene, it's like 'why was THAT in the movie? Hey you think maybe it'll 'come back later?' Maybe? I hate that!" he exclaims. His interruption in this scene

accomplishes a couple of things. First, it assimilates Harry to us as viewers, as his reasoning for "hating" pointless film or television scenes comes from his point of view as an audience member. Second, it speaks to the nature of Harry's character. We have observed a few things about him thus far: his outsider status, his gentlemanly respect for women, and his lack of self-awareness around the effect of losing his previous partner. The absence of sentimentality in his tone is clearly not to be mistaken for uncaring or insensitivity. The scene that he interrupted was an important one, emotionally speaking, because it was the first time that he met Perry. To interject would be to trivialize the scene, an effect that would free Harry from any obvious emotional attachment to meeting his close friend for the first time.

Another example of voice over being used as a self-reflexive commentary on film is at the very end of the movie, when Harry, Perry, and Harmony (played by Michelle Monaghan) are all in the hospital room after having recovered from all of the action that takes place during the course of the movie. Harry interrupts the scene again, sarcastically commenting on the fact that many studios become "paranoid" about their movies having "downer endings" so instead they choose to let all of the main characters live. "I mean, shit," he says. "Why not bring them

all back?" and Harry magically brings in a couple of the dead characters from earlier in the film, along with unrelated, but obviously deceased figures such as Abraham Lincoln. The ridiculousness of the visual juxtaposed with the truth in the commentary make for a farcical view of the traditionally happy Hollywood movie ending.

There are many ways in which "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang" directly refers to components of classic noir film. One of the most obvious examples is in the numerous chapter titles that appear on the screen before each major section of the movie. They are all named after various Raymond Chandler novels, the first one being "Trouble Is My Business." Not only are these titles a reference to film noir, but they also add to the self-reflexive commentary reminding us that we are watching a film. Another example of noir influence is in the use of a modernized version of the femme fatale. While classic noirs always pose the problem of the femme fatale and emphasize the ways in which the leading lady is seductively lethal in intention and background, I would posit that this film fixes the problem of the femme fatale by using the Hollywood cliché of the girl next door. In most noirs, we immediately sense danger in the femme fatale by her obvious sexual manipulation of the protagonist. Harmony's character, however, holds the romantic Hollywood charm of the prom queen

that Harry has been in love with since high school. He has very clearly harbored a strong interest in her personality just as much as he has in her sexual appeal. There is a scene in which Harry goes out of his way to explain to Harmony that he was not trying to touch her breast, but was instead attempting to protect her from a spider that had been crawling on her chest. The scene not only provides comedic relief from an otherwise intense plot, but it also speaks to Harry's true affection for Harmony. Her sexual prowess is present, but unlike the classic femme fatale, she does not use it to manipulate Harry. At the end of the spider scene, Harry is seemingly disturbed by Harmony's allusion to the fact that she sleeps around, another anti-femme fatale element in the plot. Instead of a power struggle, Harry and Harmony's relationship becomes a partnership of equals, a more modern version of the female lead in Hollywood films.

Classic noir films worked to present the underworld in a likable way by allowing viewers to assimilate to criminals and detectives with questionable morals. Noir directors took the idea of capturing the reality in the human struggle between right and wrong and exaggerated it with iconic character figures (such as the hard-boiled detective and the femme fatale) and dramatic cinematographic choices (tight angle shots, shadowy

lighting, etc.). Black's film has a different take on the same world. It combines the reality of human nature in noir film and the romanticism of the classic Hollywood tales, resulting in a commentary on the nature of film and how it relates to our everyday lives. The idea that we can edit and re-edit what we say and do is, for the most part, true. We as audience members have the ability to repeat a statement or erase an incorrectly written comment. However, in the face of life and death, there are many instances when we are unable to erase what we have done. There is a comedic moment towards the end of the film, for example, when Harry decides to play a game of Russian roulette with one of the criminals. He blames the negative outcome on his poor math skills, insisting that there was only an eight percent chance that the man would have been shot. It is an entertaining scene, because Harry and Perry take several minutes to argue over the trivialness of the mathematics while they are supposed to be on the run, but the scene also makes a statement about the reality of life. Harry's mistake was one that he could not edit out or erase, but life moved on and the story had to continue. Even though "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang" can be categorized as a representation of darker crime films, it uses self-reflexive elements to look at Hollywood films from a lighthearted perspective. The film asks us to enjoy an entertaining

experience, and reminds us not to take the world of Hollywood,
or our interpretation of it, too seriously.

CHAPTER 3

Gazing: Laura Mulvey and "Rear Window"

The ways in which we look at and enjoy spectacle have been psychoanalyzed over time. From Freud to Lacan, theorists have discussed possible explanations for human fascination with objects of desire and the idea of spectacle. In 1975, Laura Mulvey wrote an essay about Freud's ideas of "scopophilia" and "ego libido" in the context of feminist film theory. Her article entitled "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema" explores the ways in which the unconscious shapes male pleasure in looking or viewing, and introduces the idea that mainstream Hollywood film narrative regards women as passive objects and subjects them to what Mulvey calls the "male gaze". This culture perpetuates the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, and demonstrates the ways in which the "unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form".

The dominant Hollywood film is structured as a formal *mis-en-scene*, the traditional telling of a story through actors, settings, costumes, action, lighting, etc.. In addition to the dominant film structure, there is also a prevailing perspective in the art of visual manipulation. The existence of this prevailing structure is troubling to Mulvey, as it reinforces

the "phallocentrism" that Freud discusses in his essay on fetishism. Mulvey discusses the importance of psychoanalytic theory in the context of cinema culture, but argues that it has been dominated by the "unconscious of patriarchal society", which has thus influenced the aforementioned structure of film form. In order to do this, Mulvey discusses Freud's theories of scopophilia (the erotic pleasure in looking at an object) and ego libido (the pleasure derived from idealizing the self) and how their simultaneous existence is contradictory. The ideas of scopophilia and ego libido reveal the two contradictory pleasures of viewership as follows: 1) we enjoy making others the object of a controlling gaze (through Freud's process of scopophilia), and 2) we take pleasure in looking at or identifying with an ideal image on the screen (through a process of identification that is similar to Lacan's "mirror stage"). She argues that cinema is a medium through which the two theories can operate together harmoniously.

Using these concepts of scopophilia and ego libido, Mulvey explains that the visual techniques of cinema reveal two contradictory pleasures of viewership: 1) we enjoy making others the object of a controlling gaze (as described by Freud's process of scopophilia), and 2) we take pleasure in looking at or identifying with an ideal image on the screen (through a

process of identification that is similar to Lacan's "mirror stage"). Mulvey says that, in film, men cannot withstand sexual objectification through gaze, therefore he must split his gaze between spectacle and narrative to relieve that tension. Thus, the women on-screen must function as erotic figures for both the characters in the diegesis of the film, and for the male gaze viewing it. Also, because it is both pleasurable and threatening for the male to gaze at the female, the male viewer must somehow be able to disarm the threat in order to enjoy his cinematic experience. This means that the dominant structure of mainstream films must contain characteristics and techniques that alleviate the anxiety created by the primordial fear of castration in male viewers. This is done by creating a space in which the two contradictory concepts of scopophilia and ego libido can exist harmoniously.

According to Mulvey, male viewers are able to disarm the threat in two ways: through voyeurism (which demystifies the female object) and substituting the fetish object (for something more reassuring as opposed to dangerous). First, I would like to address the technique of voyeurism. Because the very purpose of a film's existence is to be shown and thus be seen, in theory the viewer would be aware of the fantastical aspect or falseness of the filmic setup. However, the conditions of screening and

other narrative conventions give the viewer the feeling that they are actually watching a private world, fulfilling their voyeuristic desires. At the same time, male pleasure in viewing film is also dependent on identification with the main protagonist. In order to for this identification to take place, Mulvey says that the male role in film has been made active over time, whereas the female role has been made passive. This is because the male cannot withstand sexual objectification, therefore he must take on the role of furthering the narrative or advancing the story. Hence, the male controls the fantasy world, and the story is centered around a protagonist with whom the viewer can identify, substituting the fetish object with something more reassuring. In many cases, both voyeuristic fantasy and narratorial power are used to pleasure the male viewer; the film provides a story in which he can identify with a male protagonist who proceeds to gaze at a woman existing within the diegesis of the film. The empowerment of the voyeuristic and narratorial male roles in cinema allow male viewers to circumvent the threat of castration that is represented by women on screen. The idea of women as a castration threat endangers the unity of the film's diegesis, as it takes the male viewer out of the illusionistic film narrative and reminds him of a fear that is found outside of the film's

diegesis. Thus, the manipulation of women's "to-be-looked-at-ness" has created cinematic spectacle that relieves the threat of castration for the male viewer, solves the contradiction of scopophilia and ego libido, and protects the integrity of illusionistic film narrative.

Cinematically speaking, filmmakers use the three different "looks" that work to satisfy the viewer, protect the unity of diegesis, and inherently solve the contradiction in pleasurable viewing. The three different "looks" in fictional film are as follows: that of the camera, that of the audience, and those of the characters within the world of the film. Mulvey states that the first two looks must be subordinate to the last in order to "eliminate intrusive camera presence" and prevent disruption of the truthful story-telling illusion. Even though the female presence endangers the unity of a given film's diegesis, the dominant structure of narrative film and the use of the three "looks" inherently seek to rid a given film of camera awareness so as to 1) mitigate the effects of castration threat, and 2) strengthen the voyeuristic fantasy world that cinema creates.

Mulvey refers to Alfred Hitchcock as a filmmaker who acknowledges the presence of cinematic voyeurism and who actively celebrates his fascination with it. She chooses to discuss his work as a series of examples in which the uneasiness

of the male gaze is shared with the audience. Mulvey points out that, in Hitchcock's films, "his heroes are exemplary of the symbolic order and the law [...] but their erotic drives often lead them into compromised situations." This illustrates the Hitchcockian anxiety that surrounds the concepts of attraction and the male gaze. I feel that his 1954 film "Rear Window" is most relevant to the ideas discussed here, because it represents both Freudian and Mulvian themes in figurative and literal ways, and it is a strong example of fictional film work that uses the three "looks". The film tells the story of Jeff Jeffries, a wartime photo-journalist who uses his binoculars and his camera to spy on the neighboring tenants while bound to a wheel chair. His observations lead him to believe that a murder has occurred in the apartment across the way, and his growing obsession with and eventual catching of the suspected murderer endangers him in his own apartment. Jeffries' character represents all three aforementioned "looks": that of the camera, that of the audience, and those of the characters within the world of the film. He represents the look of the camera in the literal use of his camera to observe the neighbors from his window, using his lens to zoom in and out in order to better follow their actions. He also represents the look of the camera, because the film is shot in such a way that the viewer sees everything Jeffries

does. He embodies the look of the audience for two reasons: 1) the audience sees everything that Jeffries sees, and 2) his isolation in being bound to a wheelchair (often in the darkness of his apartment at night) alludes to the isolation one feels as an audience member when watching a film in a movie theater. Lastly, he represents the look of the characters within the world of the film, as his character's primary function within the film's diegesis is to watch other characters (one of which is a scantily clad younger woman who dances in her apartment). As he watches, an "erotic dimension" is added to his gaze. Mulvey mentions film critic Jean Douchet's interpretation of Jeffries' girlfriend's character, Lisa, pointing out that, while she remains in his apartment with him (on the spectator side of his viewing lenses), she is of little sexual interest to him. However, once she crosses the street and becomes one of the characters that Jeffries is observing, their sexual chemistry is reborn. Lisa is played by the beautiful Grace Kelly but, because the male viewer identifies with the male protagonist on the screen, the desire to gaze at her is not as strong initially; the viewer's desire mirrors that of the male protagonist with whom they identify.

By the end of the film, the question of and anxiety around voyeurism and the male gaze is left unanswered and unresolved;



Fig. 6 and 7: Jeff Jeffries looks out his window with his binoculars and watches the goings on of his neighbors in "Rear Window."

Hitchcock instead chooses to reinforce the beauty, safety, and importance of the film medium. Ultimately, it is the camera that saves Jeffries' life; when the murderer sneaks into Jeffries' apartment to catch him spying, Jeffries uses his camera flash to blind the murderer and prevent him from harming him until the police come. The use of the camera as an object that both enables the voyeur and protects him adds to the ambiguity of Hitchcock's message, but I also feel that the self-reflexivity that is represented by the camera allows the ambiguity to rest harmoniously in Hitchcock's appreciation and endorsement of the power of cinema.

Mulvey's article has a similar effect. While she makes it clear that she is displeased by the objectification of women on-screen and the ways in which the idea of women as spectacle has been enforced in the patriarchal structures of Hollywood, she also points out that cinema is the medium in which the contradiction in pleasurable viewing can exist beautifully and

harmoniously. The Hollywood film has created a space in which a woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness" can be used to create spectacle and solve the ambivalence of Freud's theories in satisfying the male gaze. While it is troubling that the cinematic world of illusion is perpetually threatened by the one-dimensionality of a fetish, I feel it is to be appreciated that cinema celebrates the art of perspective and the intertwining of different "looks". It is a unique medium in that it presents an "ideology of representation that revolves around the perception of the subject", while also acknowledging the subject itself and the way the subject is presented. However, while the narratives are fake, the illusions are real, and Mulvey mourns Hollywood's growing dependence on voyeuristic mechanisms to tell its stories. The integrity of "Rear Window" lies in its use of self-reflexivity to achieve perspective.

CHAPTER 4

I: Self-reflexivity in Modern Hollywood

Many of the most popular movies today are built around revelatory narratives. In children's movies, the unveiling of the conclusion or "moral" of the story is often done in a painstakingly obvious manner, usually in the form of a speech given by a grandparent, wizard, or fairy godmother. In romantic comedies, the revelation is frequently found in one of the film's main love interests, as they suddenly look back on their checkered romantic history and decide to take an overzealously large leap forward. In action adventure films, the superhero or main protagonist is generally forced to undergo a painful experience, inevitably requiring that they overcome some crippling emotional burden that they acquired when they were young, a feat that suddenly renders them more physically and emotionally equipped to conquer bad guys and terrorists. These narratives are usually fairly aggressive in their delivery of the revelatory thought, frequently laden with musical scoring and dramatic lighting that is indicative of the emotion that is meant to be felt at the time of the revelation.

The genre of British cinema, however, often aims to capture a sense of realism that neither employs the use of revelatory

narrative, nor exploits aspects of the film medium to arouse dramatic emotional response. Andrea Arnold's 2009 film "Fish Tank," for example, is a realistic cinematization of a short period of time in the lives of its chosen characters. A work of truly realistic representation, Arnold's carefully produced film is riddled with complex feeling, but its profundity is in its striking lack of assigned emotion.³

The film invites us into the lives of Mia (played by Katie Jarvis), Joanne (played by Kierston Wareing), Tyler (played by Rebecca Griffiths), and Connor (played by Michael Fassbender), as they struggle to come together to form a makeshift family. Mia, the main protagonist, is a teenage girl who expresses herself through dance. Her striking lack of speech is laced with her sudden and sometimes inexplicable outbursts, most frequently directed at her mum, Joanne. Joanne is a young mother who pays very little attention to her two daughters. She herself is looking for love and companionship, and believes to have found it in Connor, her temporary boyfriend and token male presence in her's and the girls' lives during the film. Tyler is Mia's younger sister, a much louder, more vocal version of her older sibling. Though the two girls often fight, there is a clear bond

³ It should be noted that I am making a marked distinction between "feeling" and "emotion": emotion is defined as a conscious reaction (i.e. fear, sadness, romance, etc.), while feeling has no emotional state or reaction attached to it.

between them, perhaps a product of the neglect they both share from their mother. Connor, Joanne's new boyfriend, offers a male presence that the family has been missing, but his dishonesty and manipulation forces him to leave their lives in a very dramatic and hurtful way. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that their family-shaped want is unmatched by their individualized needs, and the three female characters come together in their being apart at the end of the movie.

The title of the film is indicative of its central visual and metaphysical themes. The film examines the quality of "being in a fish tank" in such a way that it not only applies to the events within the film, but contributes to a self-reflexive discussion of realism in the film medium itself. The fish tank metaphor is used as a vehicle through which Arnold is able to discuss the idea of realism in film. To be in a fish tank means to recognize freedom within a confined space; those in the tank utilize as much of the space as possible. The tank itself represents a small part of a much larger entity; it does not capture the entire picture, only a small slice of the whole story. It is a space in which those both inside and outside can observe and be observed at the same time. The communication between those in the tank and those outside of it is very limited; those inside the tank can observe and look at those

outside of it and vice versa, but the glass between the two parties eliminates the use of physical contact and dialogue. The glass window creates a need for other methods of communication, such as mimicry of movement or silent eye contact.

A film's relationship with its viewer is of a similar nature, the most obvious correlation being the shape of the confined space. Both the tank and the screen are rectangular, and the way that each shot is framed is, to a certain extent, dependent on the size and shape of the screen. The objects and beings inside of the space are separated from those outside by the presence of a window or a screen. We can observe the events on the screen, but we cannot physically do anything to impact or alter them in any way. Just as a fish tank is a smaller representation of a much greater body of water, a film is just a slice of its characters' lives. A fish tank is meant to simulate the real habitat of a fish, and a realist film tries to paint as accurate a picture as possible in efforts to capture the essence of the characters' lives.

In order to emphasize the correlation between the fish tank and the silver screen, Arnold gives us many aural and visual cues. Her shots are often marked by rectangular windows and her use of musical scoring is minimal. The diegesis of the film is important to notice, as it consists only of diegetic music and

ambient sound (non-diegetic music is often used to impose emotion on specific scenes). Its relative inconspicuousness allows for very realistic feeling, and elicits a more genuine response from the viewer. Arnold also uses the sounds of breathing and sloshing liquids as her main soundtrack elements. Both sounds evoke the feeling of being underwater or in an enclosed space. The sound of heavy breathing is an aural representation of the film's dominant forms of physical activity: running, dancing, and making love, while the sloshing of fluids reflects the preponderance of water and alcohol in the characters' lives. While many scenes are profoundly lacking in dialogue, the silent observances between characters also work to capture the essence of realism. The two elements of the film that I would like to examine in order to discuss the fish tank theme and its implications are as follows: 1) the use of tank-like shots (views through rectangular windows, for example), and 2) the film's diegesis (the limited dialogue and presence of aural cues).

The film begins with a black screen, the words "Fish Tank" spelled out in white letters at the center of the frame. As the title appears, the film begins with a striking aural presence: the sound of slow heavy breathing, alienated from any corresponding visual images except for the film's name. It is

then revealed that the source of the breathing is a teenage girl (Mia) alone in a room, crouching against the wall. We are unsure as to why she is out of breath, but we can assume that it is from either running or dancing. The shot is illustrative of the title; it is at a slight overhead angle, and at first we only see the top of Mia's head while the rest of the shot is dominated by the blue wall that fills the screen behind her. The effect is that it causes us to feel as though we are observing Mia from outside of a fish tank. As Mia straightens up to her full height, the camera moves to a shot of her from behind, where it is revealed that the front wall of the blue room is dominated by a series of large rectangular windows. It is from these windows that Mia is able to look out at the street, but while she can see the people on the ground, they cannot see her (the room is a few stories off the ground). As the film progresses, it becomes clear that this room is a safe haven for Mia, her place of escape and solitude where she goes to practice dance. The room is also one of the only places of power for Mia, as she is able to observe the outside world sans the disturbance of them observing her. The use of this room and the way it is presented to us is illustrative of the idea that there is freedom in confinement, and that it only represents a small part of the bigger picture in Mia's life.

Another example of rectangular framing in the film takes place the day that Mia meets Connor for the first time. She silently watches as Joanne dances around the kitchen, excited about her new boyfriend. The camera focuses on Mia's inscrutable profile as she observes her mother from the next room, watching through a rectangular cutout in the wall separating the two rooms. As Joanne is joined by Tyler, it is almost as though Mia is observing her mother and sister through a glass window that isolates her from the other two. Despite the fact that the three of them are in the same vicinity, they are unable to communicate effectively, as is evidenced by the yelling match that occurs shortly afterward.

There is also a strong presence of television screens throughout the film. The screen within the screen effect can be interpreted as a reinforcement of the idea that we are always watching and always being watched. There are several moments in the film when Mia is watching a television and mimicking the movements of dancers she sees on the screen, an instance of communication or understanding between the people on either side of the glass window. This action alludes to one of the final scenes right before Mia leaves her family. As she moves to say a complicated goodbye to Joanne, the two of them fall into a wordless, dancing rhythm in the television room. Joanne moves to

dance in front of Mia, and Mia follows suit with a similar side-step pattern. They mirror each other silently, making inconsistent eye contact as they dance together while apart. They remain exactly parallel to one another, never touching or straying from their individual lines of movement, as though there were a glass window between them. Mia remains expressionless but, at the end of the sequence, Joanne offers Mia a small smile. It is a highly poignant scene, void of emotion but heavily burdened with feeling.

Perhaps the most striking use of the window metaphor is in the very last shot, when Mia is looking back as the car pulls away from Tyler and their apartment. Prior to the very last shot, Arnold uses shaky tracking shots and rack focuses to capture the instability in Mia's life. This very organic method of shooting further reinforces the idea of realism in film. The last shot, however, is noticeably more stable. Mia looks through the rear window of the car, watching as the vehicle moves farther and farther away from Tyler's small frame. It is a memorable way to end the film; Mia is bound by two large rectangular windows, one in the front and one in the back. However, we feel compelled to ask, is she truly bound between the glass walls, or is she finally free? Perhaps the stability of the camera is signaling to us that it is not about freedom or

captivity, but about walking away with a clear view of what you are leaving behind.

The second important element of the film is its diegesis. There is a striking lack of dialogue and scoring in the film, deliberately replaced with seemingly insignificant sounds such as breathing, sloshing of water, and background noise from the television. The absence of dramatic scoring plays a key role in the film's realism, as it allows the viewer to experience genuine feeling, not dictated emotion. There is no music that instructs you to feel sad, happy, or angry, for example. Instead, Arnold emphasizes and exaggerates the sounds of a very basic human mechanism: breathing. As I mentioned previously, the film opens with the sound of heavy breathing, and the sound continues to return as an aural cue throughout the film. There are three basic forms of physical activity that are highlighted in "Fish Tank": running, dancing, and engaging in sexual activity, movements that are given even more importance in the context of a screenplay that is not dialogue-heavy. These three activities are joined by the one common act of breathing, a movement that requires no words or even thought. The presence of this breathing is powerful because it 1) relates Mia's character to the audience, and 2) fills the film's soundtrack with a sound

that is void of aggressive emotion, but can be indicative of many different feelings.

By starting the film with the sound of Mia's breathing, Arnold immediately draws the viewer into a very intimate relationship with the main protagonist. There are also many points in the film when her breathing is accompanied by an over the shoulder shot while she runs to or from something. The close sound of her breathing makes us feel as though we too need to gasp for air, that we are running alongside her. There are also many instances when the sound of breathing replaces the need for explanatory dialogue. Not only does it fill the diegesis of the film when Mia is silent and alone, it also allows for a powerful lack of speech during scenes such as the one where Mia and Connor have their inappropriately intimate encounter. The highly uncomfortable, albeit somewhat anticipated moment in the film is so poignant because it lacks obvious emotion; the complicated feelings involved are summed up in the weight of Connor and Mia's heavy breathing. As a result, the scene manages to leave us shocked, uncomfortable, furious, sad, relieved, desperate, and numb all at the same time. By using a universal human mechanism to replace dialogue in certain scenes, Arnold helps us relate to the realistic feelings of Mia's character without

explicitly telling us how to react through obvious musical scoring or emotional scripting.

Without the guidance of an explicit revelation, how are we meant to interpret the film as a whole? Is there a moral or final message that Arnold wants her viewers to remember? Perhaps the revelation of the film is that there is no revelation, that honoring realism is about capturing only a small piece of a much greater story. There is a certain profundity in that message; it does not emphasize life's brevity, but its length and multi-dimensional depth. The film's name and corresponding central theme reminds us that, just as we are viewers being affected by and observing the lives of others, there are others out there learning from and observing our lives from the other side of the glass as well. The film, then, is not an endorsement of a particular moral or lesson per se, but rather an embodiment of the idea that there are no "good" windows or "bad" windows - the most important windows are the ones that lend us a steady sense of perspective.

Similar to "Fish Tank," American films such as "Little Miss Sunshine" (2006), "Silver Linings Playbook" (2012), and "The Social Network" (2010) represent broken characters and the feeling of trappedness that is prominent in difficult personal situations. None of these films are overtly self-reflexive in



Fig. 8 and 9: Shots from "Little Miss Sunshine" that visually represent the boxed-in feeling of the film. In fig. 1, the family is inside of their Volkswagen Microbus and, in fig. 2, the family is talking at the dinner table in their kitchen.

nature, but all three are highly self-aware in that they use filmic form and cinematography to illustrate their themes. Unlike "Fish Tank," "Little Miss Sunshine" and "Silver Linings Playbook" both have traditional happy endings but, like "Fish Tank," their messages or revelations are nuanced. The cinematography, however, remains consistent throughout, and is manipulated in such a way that it guides the viewer through the story.

Directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, "Little Miss Sunshine" tells the story of a dysfunctional family that learns to accept, love, root for, and have faith in one another. The family is composed of six members, each engrossed in their own lives. The film captures the ways in which they struggle together physically and emotionally, as they travel from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Redondo Beach, California in order for Olive (the youngest member of the family) to compete in the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant. Many of the shots in the film are tight angle shots, a technique that, as mentioned

previously, creates a feeling of claustrophobia and discomfort through visual crowding. Many of the shots also highlight the boxed-in quality of the various spaces in the film. Fig. 9 shows the family sitting down for dinner in their kitchen, and the room is framed by various rectangular windows and doors that allow light in the room, but also reinforce the feeling of being closed-in. Fig. 8 is a shot of the inside of the yellow Volkswagen Microbus that the family squeezes into to make their journey from New Mexico to California.

Over time, Hollywood's classic "Love and Romance" genre has evolved into the popular category of Romantic Comedy. From classic love stories as told in films such as "When Harry Met Sally" (1989) and "Sleepless in Seattle" (1993) to 21st century films about drunken party mishaps such as "What Happens in Vegas" (2008) and multiple plot-lined feel-goods such as "Love Actually" (2003), romantic comedies are meant to emphasize the theatrically dramatic process of meeting someone and falling in love. This, however, often results in unrealistic, fairytale-esque representations of romance and relationships. While wildly popular and culturally relevant, these films tend to lack the sense of perspective that more self-aware films possess. Easy to produce and relatively simple to write, the films that fall in today's genre of Romantic Comedy have filled themselves with

quick thrills and sweet clichés, making up an important, but not necessarily refined genre of Hollywood film.

Will Gluck's romantic comedy "Friends With Benefits" (2011) is a recent "romcom" that I feel is worthy of some attention for its originality, honesty, and self-awareness. The film tells the story of a new friendship between Jamie (Mila Kunis) and Dylan (Justin Timberlake) and the ups and downs of its development from "friends with benefits" to love and care for one another. The film acknowledges the prevalence of hookup culture among people in their twenties and thirties in today's society, but it also addresses the realistic tendency to yearn for the overly dramatized, feel good Hollywood-love-story ending. The script actively references the well-known and often joked about instability of George Clooney's love life, and incorporates Romantic Comedy tropes such as dating montage sequences. Jamie's character refers to herself as "tough" on the outside, but Dylan knows better, pointing out that she likes fairytales and "all of that girly shit."

Towards the beginning of the movie, there is a scene when they watch Jamie's favorite movie, a generic looking romantic comedy starring Jason Segel and Rashida Jones. We see clips of the film, all of which are embellished with slow motion sequences, white doves, carriages, and giggly inside jokes

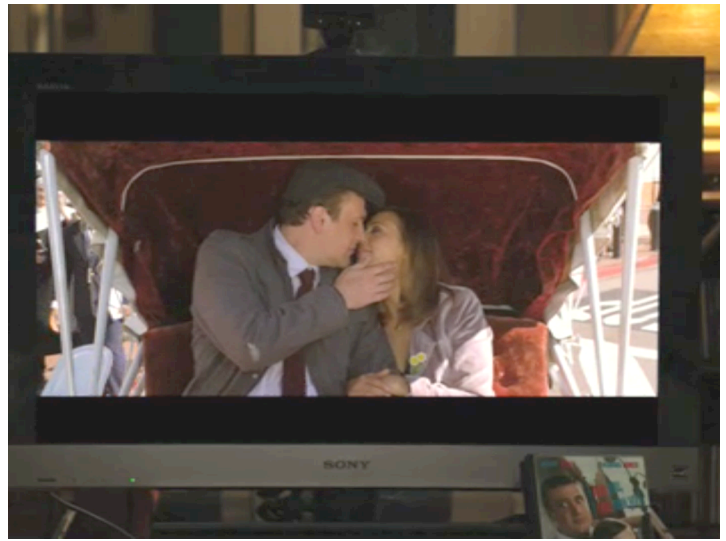


Fig. 10 and 11: Jamie and Dylan watch Jamie's favorite movie, a cheesy Hollywood romantic comedy ("Friends with Benefits").

between the leading characters. Dylan comments on Hollywood's need to narrate romantic comedies with "cheesy and unrelated" pop songs to try and "tell you how you're supposed to feel every second of the movie." As he describes the different sounds that are used to make you feel fear, suspense, or happiness, the score of the actual film follows suit and aurally reinforces his words. It is unclear whether the sound effects are meant to be diegetic (as in, sound effects that are overheard from the film that they are watching) or non-diegetic, but the lack of distinction is significant. The obvious visual cheesiness of the romantic comedy that they are watching separates the world of Hollywood romance from real world romance, but the score of the fake film juxtaposed with the score of the real film blurs the lines between the two. This speaks to the overall theme of the film, in that it acknowledges both the separation and the connection between romantic comedies and real life romances.

II: Self-reflexivity in Television and Popular Culture

Compared to film, television is a relatively recent form of onscreen entertainment. The first television shows often borrowed different performance and production techniques from the theater and film industries. Many of the first television shows were onscreen variety shows, reminiscent of Vaudeville acts and other live theatrical productions. There was very little self-awareness in early television; the shows lacked shot variety, linear plot lines, and an understanding of the medium and its differences from theater and film. The first era of television was considered to be between the years of 1948 and 1957. Some define the era as the time of "Vaudeo," as many shows of the era married Vaudeville styles with the new video medium. This is often described as the period when television was little more than "radio with pictures." There was much more focus on the visually entertaining than anything else; techniques such as fall-down slapstick, extravagant costuming, and sight gags were widely used. Shows such as "I Love Lucy" and "The Milton Berle Show" were some of the most popular programs; both of these shows contributed to the increase in television ownership in households from less than nine percent to over seventy percent in 1956.

The comedy in "I Love Lucy" lies in the incongruous nature of Lucy's role as a traditional housewife. One of the most self-reflexive episodes of the show is entitled "Lucy Does a TV Commercial," affectionately referred to as the "Vitameatavegamin" episode that first aired in 1952. The episode begins with Lucy in the living room, lovingly darning a sock for Ricky, only to find that she has sewn the opening together. Lucy's understanding of her limitations as and lack of interest in being a housewife leads her to the conclusion that she wants to be in a commercial on Ricky's show. Ricky denies her the job, pointing out that she has no experience being on television. Determined to prove her onscreen capability, Lucy decides to remove the insides of their television set and act out a commercial while physically inside the television screen window. She intends to impress Ricky with her skills and realistic representation of television entertainment but, instead, we watch as she repeatedly breaks the illusion of her being on television. The first time she breaks the illusion, she drops an object and reaches outside of the television set to retrieve it (as seen in Fig. 1 and 2); the second time is when she slaps Ricky's hand out of the way as he jokingly attempts to "change the channel" to "see what else is on TV." As Lucy continues her charade, Ricky makes many cleverly self-reflexive comments,

exclaiming "I can't get over how clear the picture is!" and "Whaddya know, third dimensional television!"

Towards the end of the episode, Lucy has managed to work her way into the commercial on Ricky's show, and the final scenes in the episode take place in the taping studio. The viewer watches the live recording of Rick's show from the point of view of the studio camera; we are watching a television show inside of a television show, the effect being that we feel as though we are actually in the "I Love Lucy" world.

The "Vitameatavegamin" scene plays off of the incongruity of the taping situation: the television medium allows for reshooting and editing in the production process, the assumption being that the actors' repeated recitation of lines will improve the smoothness of takes overtime. Lucy, however, regresses in her acting skills as she is asked to consume more and more of the Vitameatavegamin solution and becomes progressively more drunk (the solution is twenty-three percent alcohol). The episode ends with Lucy wandering onto the set in her inebriated state, disrupting Ricky's recording process and distracting the viewers in his audience. The "Vitameatavegamin" product can be interpreted as a humorous commentary on the prevalence of ads on television and their purpose in the everyday household at the time. Many daytime television shows and ads targeted housewives,

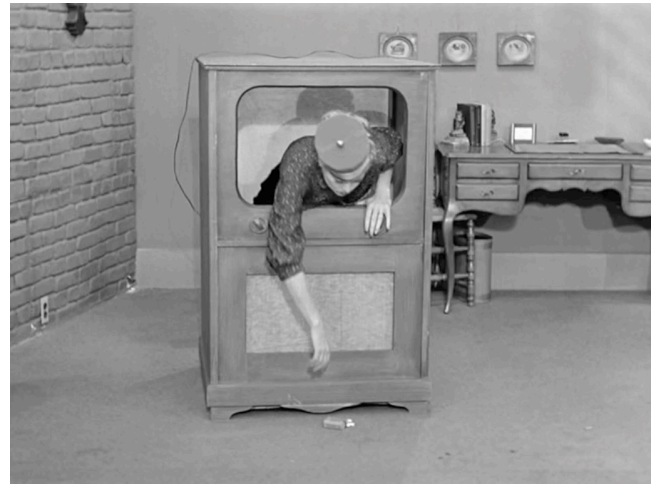


Fig. 12 and 13: Lucy reaches outside of the television set to retrieve the object she is "advertising" after having dropped it.

promoting products that served a multitude of uses to decrease the amount of work a woman needed to do around the house.

"Vitameatavgamin," while supposedly nutritious, was an obviously comic representation of a product that was supposed to fulfill many dietary needs at once but, ironically, ended up intoxicating those who took it.

As is represented in "Lucy Does a TV Commercial," television became a large part of popular culture through the rise of consumerism and the advancement of technology in America. As television sets became more and more prevalent in households across America, major channels began to pay more attention to their audiences, the need for advertisements, and the weekly structure of the television schedule.

Even though television was technically the offspring of Hollywood film, many of its most entertaining techniques and characteristics are borrowed from theater. Elements such as the

breaking of the fourth wall and the prevalence of musical theater became self-reflexive elements that were and continue to be used very heavily in television comedy today.

One of the most prominent examples of self-reflexive television can be seen in David E. Kelley's "Ally McBeal," which aired on Fox for six seasons from 1997 to 2002. Much of the show's comedy is located in its self-reflexive elements and theatrical tropes, both of which create inside jokes that can be seen as having isolating effects on viewers who are unfamiliar with the show. I, however, feel that this effect is part of Kelley's self-reflexive vision for the show. The creation and continued use of inside jokes and character-specific tropes draws attention to the idea of watching a world within another world. The distinction between the real world and the "Ally McBeal world" or, rather, the isolation of one world from another lends a self-reflexive quality to the show's structure.

The "mockumentary" is a recent addition to television's situational comedy genre, and quickly rose to popularity through shows such as "The Office" and "Modern Family." Both shows are shot in a documentary format, alternating between individual interviews of the shows' characters and shots of the characters' every day lives. "Mockumentaries" generally use character-based plot movement; they insert highly distinct, but equally

intriguing characters into relatively mundane situations. The camera's point of view serves as the audience's window into the characters' lives, while its presence gives us the impression that we are watching a show within a show, drawing attention to television and film form.

"The Office" first aired in 2005 on NBC. The show was adapted from a BBC series of the same name, and was created by Ricky Gervais (who also starred in the BBC version) and Stephen Merchant. The series tells the story of the relationships that form between the people in the workplace of Dunder Mifflin Paper Company, located in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Some of the main characters directly acknowledge the camera's presence, often shooting looks in the direction of the lens as though to exchange glances with the person working the camera. The effect is a feeling of intimacy with the characters that compels viewers to continue watching. The self-reflexivity of the mockumentary format distances the audience from the situation on the screen, reminding viewers that they are watching a show within a show. At the same time, however, the self-reflexivity also makes the show and its characters appear more realistic through the awareness of television form that mockumentary filming provides. Aired in 2013, the two-part series finale of

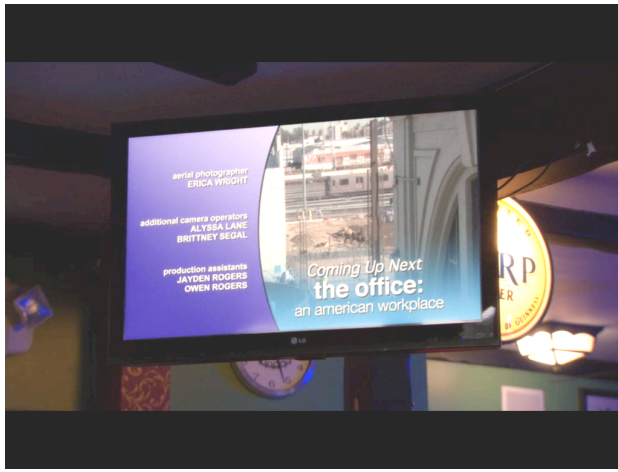


Fig. 14 and 15: The workers of Dunder Mifflin watch as their documentary is aired on television in the season 9 finale of "The Office."

"The Office" was centered around the television premier of the documentary that the office camera crew had been shooting for the entirety of the show's nine seasons. Concluding the show with the acknowledgement of the camera's presence and the incorporation of the documentary into the actual plot of the series emphasized the self-reflexive elements of "The Office." The end of the series allowed for the characters of the show to become the viewers; it manipulated our perception of the separation between the real world and the world of the show by likening the show's characters to viewers just like us. Not only was this ending a cleverly crafted representation of the acknowledgement of television form, but it was also in line with the show's fundamental theme: ordinary can be extraordinary if you take the time to sit down and watch it happen.

Created by Carter Bays and Craig Thomas, "How I Met Your Mother" quickly rose to popularity after its debut on CBS in

2005. The show also lasted for nine seasons, each of which was a small part of a long story told from the character Ted Mosby's (Josh Radnor) point of view in the year 2030. The story is told retrospectively, as Ted describes all of the events that happened to him and his four best friends Marshall (Jason Segel), Lily (Alyson Hannigan), Robin (Cobie Smulders), and Barney (Neil Patrick Harris) leading up to the time when he met the mother of his children. The show's format is unlike that of many other sitcoms today in that it does not tell its story in the present; instead, its retrospective narration allows the characters to edit and retell different parts of the story in the way that they would like them to be portrayed to the viewers. The effect of this quality is that the show draws attention to the role of the narrator and the idea that, in a given story, he or she knows what will happen before the audience does.

The form of "How I Met Your Mother" reinforces the show's content. The series is based on the idea of storytelling, and works to to encapsulate a sense a perspective in the context of romantic, friendly, and familial relationships. It is narrated as a long series of life lessons as told by Ted to his children.

Despite the many flowery and, in my opinion, overly decorated references to the idea of "destiny" and "the

universe," the show's self-reflexive narration accomplishes its goal in bringing its viewers a different perspective on life. Dance breaks, musical interludes, editing and retelling of stories, and overly dramatized reactions to everyday happenings (often ones that reference cult classics such as the "Star Wars" and "Indiana Jones" series) are just a few of the elements that make the show a highly self-aware series. "How I Met Your Mother" fans appreciate the show, because it narrates the lives of twenty and thirty-somethings as they are living in the present day; much of the scripting includes definitions and categorizations for phenomena that occur in the lives of young singles and their friends today. Not only is this a highly accessible topic for many viewers, it also reinforces the idea of perspective in that it promotes the feeling that someone is observing the events in our lives and telling our stories.

However, similar to "Ally McBeal," "How I Met Your Mother" thrives on its character tropes and its self-referencing jokes: Robin's obsession with guns, Barney's addiction to suits and catch phrases, and Ted's misplaced pride in his bright red cowboy boots, to name a few. The strength of the core group and their prevalence in the series sometimes contributes to a lack of realistic perspective within the world of the show. In order to offset this effect, the significant others of Robin, Barney,

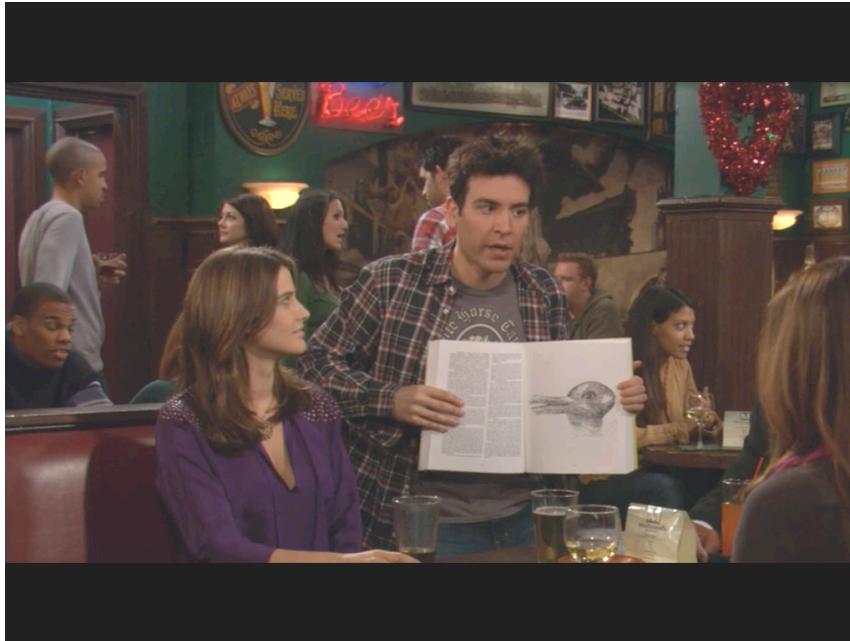


Fig. 16: Ted Mosby (Josh Radnor) explains the “duck-rabbit theory” to the gang, referencing the phenomenon that one can meet someone and view them as a rabbit (someone who they are not attracted to) and then, one day, suddenly view them as a duck (someone who they would like to date).

and Ted are often the ones who bring the stories back to the show's reality and lend a sense of perspective to the principle characters. Because the show is about storytelling, this element is particularly important when the gang retells stories about their time as friends living in New York. They often tell stories within other stories; for example, in the 2011 episode “Disaster Averted,” the group tries to explain the story of the “No boogie boarding” sign in their favorite bar, MacLaren's Pub. In the process, they become engrossed in telling several other stories about their lives. Robin's boyfriend at the time, Kevin (guest star Kal Penn), is the one who refocuses the conversation multiple times, eager to hear the rest of the “No boogie boarding” story.

Chapter 5

Harnessing Visibility

Harnessing visibility in cinema is the art of creating and sharing a perspective that introduces the viewer to a broader perception of the real world as it relates to the film, and the film as it relates to the real world. In order to accomplish this, the filmmaker must produce a film that marries content and form. Form must reinforce content and content must draw attention to form. However, while the idea of cinematic perspective remains the same over time, the ways in which it is created have become more diverse.

With the rapid advancement of technology and the growth of the film and television industries, the focus of filmmaking has diversified greatly. Today, many films are made with the intent of creating spectacle (James Cameron's "Avatar" (2009), for example), and many are made for pure humor and relaxing entertainment (films such as "The Hangover" series). In addition, the rise of animation has contributed to genres geared towards both children and adults ("Monsters Inc." (2001) versus "Ted" (2012)). While it should be acknowledged that the film and television mediums continue to become increasingly self-aware, the use of overt self-reflexivity to express that self-awareness has waned. There are a couple of recent films that display overt

self-reflexivity; in addition to Ben Affleck's "Argo," actor Joseph Gordon Levitt's recent directorial debut, "Don Jon" (2013), is very obviously self-reflexive in nature. Joseph Gordon Levitt takes the modern day cultural anxiety around the porn industry and uses adult videos to incorporate self-reflexive elements throughout the film. While, in my opinion, the screenplay was not the strongest, the idea of using self-reflexivity to artfully express a traditionally taboo topic in cinema is worthy of attention and examination.

Cinema is meant to address, discuss, and communicate various ideas and points of view across many different and highly diverse audiences. No matter the viewing topic, perspective in cinema is an essential component of the audience's experience. Filmic self-reflexivity simultaneously creates an accessible viewing space for audience members, and expands the audience's understanding of the situation being portrayed on the screen. While the topics themselves may be uncomfortable, or considered inaccessible to viewers, the perspective that self-reflexivity creates allows for a highly inclusive and entertaining cinematic experience. It is important to remember that filmmaking and film viewing are equal participants in the production process; the appreciation of the relationship between a film's form and its content is the

cinematic element that allows the participants on either side of the screen to connect and communicate.

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